

Shakespeare: A Life on Stage

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Illustration for TIME by John Ritter



Shakespeare's birthday on April 23 will be marked by an extraordinary relay. Over 24 hours, 60 groups of youngsters from New Zealand to Hawaii will enact excerpts from his plays. As part of this project, a Serbian youth group will perform *Romeo and Juliet*. How will they respond in a country so scarred by its own history of tribal divisions? Life has taught me a hard lesson about the power and impact of that play: my father, who died in 1970, banished me from his life because I played Juliet in a school production that dared to confront the prejudices of my people.

I was born in Kampala, Uganda. My ancestors had moved there from India, part of a wave of migration that began in the 1880s, when the British brought over Indian indentured laborers to build the East African railway. They were followed by Indian entrepreneurs and the impoverished, all hoping to make good in that fecund land.

British imperialists set the migrants up to be a bulwark between themselves and "barbaric" blacks. Class and race divisions were institutionalized and internalized. Asian settlers saw indigenous Africans as Calibans — as crude, lascivious and untrustworthy as *The Tempest's* half-man, half-demon. Africans, in turn, detested the brown interlopers. To them, Asian merchants were like Shylock: usurers and exploiters.

In 1965, our English teacher decided to stage *Romeo and Juliet* and make it a metaphor of our divided lives. By acting as young lovers on stage, John Abwole, the African Romeo, and I breached the wall separating us. My family and community reacted with appalling cruelty. Papa never spoke to me again.

Shakespeare captivates audiences in the West, and resonates profoundly in postcommunist nations. But he is most alive for people of color. South Asians and Arabs and their diasporic peoples are Elizabethans still. In their world, children are parental possessions, marriages arranged, personal autonomy frowned upon. Strong women like Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* or Katherine the shrew must be tamed. Countless Juliets are bullied, beaten, even killed if they refuse to be despatched to a chosen bridegroom. They hear their own fathers in Capulet's warning to his rebellious daughter:

*An you be mine, I'll give you to my friend;
An you be not, hang, beg, starve, die in the streets
For, by my soul, I'll ne'er acknowledge thee ...*

Some of the real-life tragedies I have witnessed over the years echo Shakespeare. Bharti, a young Hindu, used to take refuge in our house in Kampala to escape her oppressive father; he tried to force her into a marriage and she killed herself. My chemistry teacher, also a Hindu, fell in love with a Muslim woman; her family whisked her off to Pakistan and he swallowed acid in the school laboratory, dying for love. A distant relative in Tanzania was charged with hiring killers to murder her oldest son, his wife and their babies because her husband threatened to disown her favorite younger boy. The papers called her "Lady Macbeth"; she fled to Pakistan and died alone.

Shakespeare speaks directly to those suffering wars and oppression. When Julius Nyerere became the first President of independent Tanzania in 1964, he translated *Julius Caesar* into Swahili, then sent actors into villages to perform it and discuss the dangers of overweening power. Today, Arab and African exiles across Europe imagine a bloody vengeance against their leaders, those tribal Macbeths and oil-rich Caesars. As Kenya descended into violence last January, Leo, a Rwandan exile in London, rang me. One day, he said, the citizenry will bear this no longer, just like the citizens of 15th century England who rebelled against their aristocratic rulers, tired of the bloodletting and power struggles. He had just seen the Royal Shakespeare Company's (RSC) production of *Henry VI*. During its run, actors David Oyelowo and Chuk Iwuji — both of African origin — have been superb Kings, inhabiting the past and the present, and conveying through old conflicts the anguish of the strife now ravaging African nations, as well as the defiant optimism that may yet save them.

And in places where censorship reigns, Shakespeare can say what others cannot. Kuwaiti director Sulayman Al-Bassam uses him for subversive ends. "If you are an Arab theater maker looking to take a pop at authority, Shakespeare is your perfect bedmate, co-conspirator and alibi," he has said. Such is the yearning for catharsis in the Middle East that, when he took his *Richard III* to Egypt, it provoked a near riot among people who couldn't get tickets.

I have turned the *Romeo and Juliet* tragedy in my own life into a theatrical piece commissioned by the RSC. After the show, I am often asked if I regret playing Juliet. No, I say. Shakespeare was worth the sacrifice — rather him than the love of a father. The playwright knows and serves me better.